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## ABSTRACT

Even with computer spell check, it is important for students to learn to spell words correctly. Teachers should make the spelling curriculum meaningful for students by maintaining their attention, showing them the purpose and value of learning spelling, and providing necessary tools for correct spelling. Several spelling instruction plans may provide for individual differences in spelling achievement. What is important in differentiated instruction is assisting each student to achieve as much as possible through teaching methods or philosophies such as individual spelling lists, methods/learning activities, contextualized situations, experimentalism and problem solving, or realism and mastery. Other differentiated instruction methods might include: (1) a contract system; (2) an enrichment center; (3) a learning centers approach; (4) individualized spelling; (5) multiple series of spelling texts; and (6) computer technology. (EF)

# Differentiated Instruction in Spelling.

by Marlow Ediger

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## **DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION IN SPELLING**

Differentiated instruction may be a key word to use to improve instruction in all curriculum areas, correct spelling of words being no exception. It is important for students to learn to spell words correctly for the following reasons:

1. computer spell check will not always be available in spelling words correctly.
2. spell check does not catch all misspelled words. Thus, any word, such as a homonym, is spelled correctly with spell check regardless if that word is wanted or not by the writer in writing.
3. the writer in using a word processor has to be close enough in the correct spelling of any word for spell check to be of help in making needed corrections. Thus, if the word "night" is spelled "ngbll," spell check can provide no help with what should be the correct spelling.
4. computers may not be available when a person is writing and long hand may need to be used. There is at the moment then no help available in the correct spelling of words.
5. quality communication involves correct spelling of words in print discourse.

What might the teacher do to improve the spelling curriculum so that optimal communication by students may become a reality?

### **Keys to a Quality Spelling Curriculum**

The psychology of learning is a vital element to emphasize in assisting students to become good spellers to communicate ideas well in writing. Thus, the teacher needs to

1. engage all learners to become active participants in learning to spell words correctly. Securing and maintaining learner attention in time devoted to spelling instruction is important.
2. assist students to perceive purpose and value in learning to spell words correctly. If students are lead to believing that there are purposes in learning to spell, then each purpose should propel the learner to increase spelling skills.
3. guide students to use correctly spelled words in diverse kinds of writing, such as narrative, expository, and creative.
4. diagnose and help students remedy spelling errors.
5. provide learners a variety of tools to spell words correctly.

These skills include necessary phonics, syllabication, noticing words following a pattern, contextual use of spelling words in functional situations, as well as having a supply of mastered basic sight words,

A meaningful spelling curriculum should then be in the offing for

each student. A variety of different kinds of experiences for students should assist in providing differentiated instruction.

### **Philosophy of Spelling Instruction**

Teachers and administrators need to assess different plans of spelling instruction. Each plan has unique features available to provide for individual differences in spelling achievement. First, spelling words for student mastery can come from research studies. A well known study (Dolch, 1955) identified 220 basic sight words for student mastery in reading. These words may also become objectives for the teaching of spelling. The 220 words represent those which children in the study used most frequently in writing. Usefulness then becomes a very important criteria to stress in the selection of words for students to master in spelling. A less well known study (Kyte, 1943) identified 100 words for student mastery on the primary grade levels. In supervising student teachers over a thirty year period of time, the writer has talked to many cooperating teachers who maintain that the Dolch study of 1955 is still up-to-date and represents very worthwhile words for students to use in writing. Be that as it may, teachers need to be aware of quality research studies which do attempt to identify salient words for student mastery. The teacher might also add/eliminate words deemed to be important or irrelevant for learner mastery.

In guiding students to study spelling words from research studies, the teacher needs to have students experience a variety of learning opportunities in order that meaningful learning occurs. Meaningful learning does not rule out some memorization, such as words that possess many irregularities in spelling but are useful in writing, including "two, to, too, blue, moon, through, threw," among others, that contain the same ending sound, but the spelling of each varies. Inconsistencies here do make for more difficulty in learning to spell words as compared to those having sound (phonetic)/ symbol (grapheme) relationships. The correct spelling of words, however, is exact. There are a few word that have two correct spellings, but that still makes for certainty as to how a word should be spelled for it to be correct. Research studies have their weaknesses in stressing a quality spelling curriculum. These weaknesses include the following:

1. these are words that average children use in writing, but individual learners may need numerous different or other words, beyond the core as identified by Dolch (1955) or Kyte (1943), among other researchers.

2. methods of learning to spell these words are not provided by researchers. It is good to have suggestions here, but methods will still

need to be individualized for a student.

3. core words identified by researchers need to be presented in a certain sequence for optimal learning. The teacher, not the researcher, is a key person here in sequencing spelling words for students so that the highest achievement is possible from each learner. Use of research studies results is one way then of differentiating spelling instruction among learners. This method may be used along with others in teaching and learning. The writer noticed in one classroom supervised in student teaching that the cooperating teacher had an enrichment center for challenging selected students to master research identified words!

A second method of teaching spelling in a differentiated curriculum is to use a carefully chosen basal spelling text. The words herein are arranged in a selected list for mastery on a sequential weekly basis. Each week then has a new list for mastery. Spelling texts provide learning opportunities directly related to the list for student mastery for that particular week. The teacher may bring in his/her own learning opportunities in place of or added to those provided by the writer of the spelling text. Flexibility is an important concept to emphasize when advocating differentiated instruction. For example, the teacher may pretest students on Monday on being able to spell words correctly from a list in the basal. Those words already mastered need not be studied by the learner. If selected students obtain 100% correct spelling of words on Monday, they may then practice spelling bonus words to receive extra credit and become motivated to achieve a higher level in differentiated instruction. What is important in differentiated instruction is to assist each student to achieve as much as possible, be it through a list of spelling words, different from that of others, or methods/learning activities used in teaching spelling. The teacher then may stress spelling text use along with other methods of students learning to spell words correctly. The following stress flexibility in spelling textbook use:

1. use fascinating learning opportunities which capture learner attention and purpose. A creative teacher tries different ways to capture learner interest and motivation to achieve more optimally in mastering a given set of words!

2. use individual and cooperative learning methods of study for student's mastering a specific number of spelling words (See Dunn and Dunn, 1978, for a discussion of learning styles to guide more optimal student achievement).

3. use multiple intelligences theory in assisting students to master a given set of words in spelling. Gardner (1993), in his research, stressed students using their very own intelligence in indicating that which has been learned. He identified eight different intelligences possessed by learners and each can be a way to reveal what has been learned. These eight intelligences are the following with an example for each provided by the author:

- a) verbal/linguistic-- writing words individually for test taking or within a sentence or extended writing.
- b) visual/spatial --- illustrating words/sentences in content writing.
- c) logical/mathematical --- use of phonics where applicable in logically harmonizing sounds with symbols.
- d) music/rhythmic --- correct spelling of words can provide musical chants for jumping rope. Songs may be written and composed with the use of a set of spelling words
- e) Intrapersonal --- selected learners do best by studying words on an individual basis.
- f) Interpersonal --- students in this category do best in spelling words in cooperative learning situations.
- h) bodily/kinesthetic --- the increased proficiency in using the gross and finer muscles in writing spelling words in context.
- i) scientific --- objective information is wanted by scientists. In context. Spelling may be stressed across the curriculum in writing science subject matter, as well as in other academic areas, such as the social sciences. The correct spelling of words is objective and subject to verification with dictionary use.

Spelling has been emphasized in highly competitive situations such as in county wide spelling contests. The writer won second place in the 1930s, in competition among top spellers of other schools in McPherson County, Kansas. The county wide spelling contest stressed an appointed teacher pronouncing each word aloud to contestants, using it in a sentence, and then pronouncing that word aloud again. The word was then written by each contestant. Within the school attended, the author also experienced the competitive spelling bee! Is competition bad with today's emphasis placed upon cooperative learning and keeping the involved group together in achievement? The answer is "no" unless the following occurs:

1. a dog eat dog competition whereby hatred and hostility result. Negative competition can also occur equally so in cooperative learning situations. The whole point is that the teacher and students need to work for a wholesome environment, conducive to learning for all.
2. put downs are in vogue. Positive attitudes need to be developed, be it in cooperative learning or competitive situations. All students need to be accepted and respected.

A third method of teaching emphasizes contextualism in the correct spelling of words. Thus, application of what has been learned needs to be stressed. Too frequently, correct spelling of words is learned from a list with no application of learnings being involved. Rather, students need to use spelling words in a variety of contextual situations, such as in the following:

1. creative writing in different kinds of poetry, fairy tales, fables, tall tales, legends, myths, and folk tales.

2. expository writing in book reports, biographies, outlines, summaries, reviews, precis' writing, letters, directions, and subject matter content.

3. narrative writing as in short stories, novels, library books for children, proverbs, psalms, and diary entries.

A rich learning environment needs to be available for all students for correct spelling of words to occur!

By making use of spelling words, students will be writing about their very own purposes which then differentiates instruction. For example, students may choose their very own title for a couplet, triplet, quatrain, limerick, haiku, tanka, or free verse, depending upon the kind of poetry being studied. Or in expository writing, students individually may choose their own library books to write reports thereon. The spelling words needed in writing will depend upon the student's needs.

Fourth, experimentalism (See Dewey, 1916) as a philosophy of instruction, stresses a problem solving approach. Subject matter then is learned to be used in solving identified problems. The spelling curriculum, too, may emphasize students studying correct spelling of words as needed when solving problems. Problem solving stresses students

1. identifying a problem in an ongoing unit of study in the curriculum. the problem needs to be adequately delimited so that clarity is involved in problem solving.

2. subject matter needs to be gathered from a variety of reference sources in answer to the chosen problem.

3. an hypothesis is developed as a tentative answer to the problem.

4. the hypothesis is tested in lifelike situation.

5. if necessary, the hypothesis may be modified, changed, or kept as is. If changes need to be made, additional data gathering become necessary.

In each of the five steps of problem solving above, correct spelling of content may be needed to ensure accurate and complete communication. What is needed depends upon the situation. There are no absolutes here in terms of a needed core of words for spelling mastery.

Differentiated instruction in problem solving depends upon which words need to be mastered in written communication in the different flexible steps of problem solving.

Fifth, realism as a philosophy of education stresses the methods of science, involving measurability. Thus, "whatever exists, exists in some amount, and if it does exist, it can be measured." Measurability is emphasized in the use of behaviorally stated objectives in teaching spelling. These measurably stated objectives are determined, prior to instruction, by the teacher. Students then, prior to teaching and learning, know which words need to be mastered. The source for these spelling words may come from different places, such as research studies, the spelling text, contextual writing, problem solving experiences, among others. Students may be pretested on any list so that words mastered need not be studied by the learner. Pupils may work individually or collectively in mastering any number of feasible words in spelling. Motivation for mastering any feasible number of words in correct spelling comes from involved learners. Clearly, a worthy goal in spelling achievement is to motivate learners to spell as many words correctly as possible in spelling and thus provide for individual differences (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Twelve)..

#### **Additional Approaches**

The teacher needs to be observant and study additional procedures of differentiated instruction to provide for individual achievement levels of learners. The following may also be used:

1. a contract system whereby a student agrees to master a certain number of words with a due date given on the agreement, signed by both teacher and learner.
2. an enrichment center in the classroom containing "challenge words" for students to master in spelling.
3. a learning centers approach whereby a student may choose the center and task in mastering a given set of words in spelling. Each center should contain relevant spelling words and interesting related activities for students.
4. individualized spelling in which a student masters a set of words based on what he/she missed in functional writing. The number of words to be mastered should always harmonize with what is possible and feasible for the learner. Spelling should be an enjoyable experience so that good attitudes are developed.
5. multiple series of spelling texts provide a broader scope from which words may be selected for student mastery (See Ediger, 2000, Chapter Fourteen).
6. computer technology use may challenge many students to achieve optimally in spelling, such as in tutorial, drill and practice, simulation, gaming, and diagnosis/remediation programs.

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